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ABSTRACT

Castolon, a small trading and farming community in far southwest Texas has a history that includes harmonious mixing of the people along the United States-Mexico border. The first inhabitants were American Indians who hunted and farmed. By 1900, the area began to attract U.S. and Mexican farmers and ranchers interested in establishing homesteads. Just after the Mexican Revolution ended, two men created a farming, ranching, and storekeeping partnership at Camp Santa Helena, now known as Castolon. They named their business La Harmonia Company, a name they hoped would reflect a continuing condition of the area, harmony among people. This lesson about frontier life in Texas is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file, "Castolon Historic District" and other source materials. It can be used in teaching units on westward expansion or U.S. geography. Students practice map reading skills and analyze photographs and primary documents. Following an explanatory introduction ("About This Lesson"), which also lists objectives and materials for students, the lesson is divided into six sections: "Setting the Stage: Historical Context"; "Locating the Site: Maps" (Texas; Southern Part of Big Bend); "Determining the Facts: Readings" (Settling the Big Bend; Captain Lafferty's Report; Colonel Hornbrook's Recruiting Announcement; Frontier Border Trading Post); "Visual Evidence: Images" (La Harmonia Store, 1961; Cotton Fields with the Sierra Ponce in the Background; Old Cotton Gin at Castolon; La Harmonia Store, Garage, Shop and Water Tower, 1955; Castolon, Texas; Cerro Castellan, from Castolon); "Putting It All Together: Activities" (Growing Up in Castolon; Learning Some Spanish; Comparing Castolon to the Local Community); and "Supplementary Resources." (BT)

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Teaching with Historic Places

Castolon: A Meeting Place of Two Cultures

Teaching with Historic Places
National Register of Historic Places
National Park Service
1849 C. Street, N.W., Suite NC400
Washington, D.C. 20240

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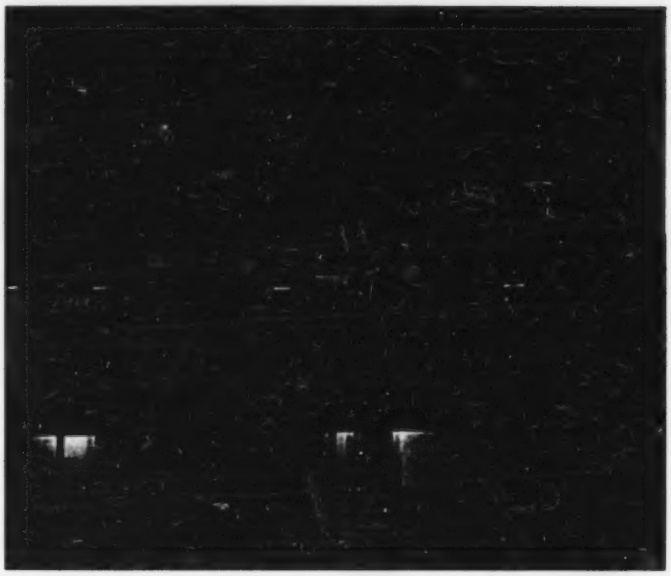
Castolon: A Meeting Place of Two Cultures

Set below the towering cliffs of the Sierra Ponce, Castolon is a small trading and farming community in far southwest Texas. While the muddy Rio Grande brings a constant supply of water to the area, the lack of steady rain makes the landscape harsh. White and yellow soils lie open to the southern sun, woody vegetation is sparse and stunted, and turkey vultures soar overhead. Yet Castolon offers more than severity: its history includes a harmonious mixing of the people along the United States-Mexico border.



(Big Bend National Park)

The first inhabitants of this section of the Rio Grande flood plain were American Indians, who farmed and hunted. By 1900, the area began to attract American and Mexican farmers and ranchers interested in establishing homesteads and raising families. As the rest of the U.S. entered the industrial age, the section of West Texas along the Rio Grande remained a frontier society. The 1910 Mexican Revolution brought unrest and danger to people on both sides of the river, as bandits and raiders invaded the area. The U.S. Army responded by commissioning permanent and temporary camps along the Rio Grande. One such post was Camp Santa Helena, located in the southwest corner of today's Big Bend National Park. Just after the Mexican Revolution ended, two men created a farming, ranching, and storekeeping partnership at Camp Santa Helena, now known as Castolon. They named their business La Harmonia Enterprises, a name they hoped would accurately reflect a continuing condition of the area--harmony between peoples.

This lesson is based on the Castolon Historic District, one of the thousands of properties and districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

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About This Lesson

This lesson about frontier life in Texas is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file, "Castolon Historic District," and other source materials about Castolon and ranching in the Big Bend region. It was written by Carol E. Sperling, former Supervisory Park Ranger at Big Bend National Park.

Where it fits into the curriculum

Topics: Topics: The lesson could be used in teaching units on westward expansion or United States geography. Students will practice skills of map reading, and analysis of photographs and primary documents.

Time period: Late 19th century to early 20th century

Objectives for students

1) To understand living conditions for settlers around Castolon at the turn of the 20th century, including how they supported themselves.

2) To explain why early settlers in the area of the Rio Grande felt free to cross the international boundary frequently.

3) To list, in English and Spanish, 10 commodities local ranch families could have obtained at the Castolon trading post.

4) To compare the early history of Castolon to that of their own communities in the early-to-mid 1900s.

Materials for students

The materials listed below either can be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students.

1) two maps showing Texas and the southern part of Big Bend;

2) four readings describing the settlement of Big Bend, army life on the frontier, and Castolon's role as a trading post;

3) six photographs of Castolon and the surrounding area.

Visiting the site

Castolon Historic District is located in the southwest corner of Big Bend National Park, in West Texas. Park headquarters are 100 miles southeast of Alpine, Texas, off State Highway 118, and Castolon is 38 miles southwest of headquarters. For information, contact the Superintendent, Big Bend National Park, Big Bend National Park, TX 79834 or visit the park's Web page at http://www.nps.gov/bibe/

Setting the Stage

Keep two general concepts in mind as you begin your study of Castolon, a small trading and farming community in far southwest Texas. First, although international boundaries sometimes correspond to natural features we can see--the U.S.-Mexican boundary does follow part of the course of the Rio Grande--borders themselves are not a visible part of the landscape. They exist because humans have created that idea, and they can change over time.

Second, trends and new technology do not always appear in all places at the same time. For example, while many Americans were driving automobiles and having milk delivered each morning to their houses, people in West Texas still traveled largely by horse or horse-drawn wagon and depended on their gardens, fields, and livestock for most of their food.

West Texas is arid, sparsely vegetated, and shows a great deal of topographic variation. The buildings in the Castolon Historic District sit on a mesa about 1,900 feet above sea level and just above the flood plain of the Rio Grande. About two miles away from the La Harmonia Store, a line of huge limestone cliffs--the Sierra Ponce--fill the southern horizon. To the north lies a single, flat-topped peak called Cerro Castellan and, beyond that, the Chisos Mountains. Average rainfall in the Castolon area is about eight inches each year. The soil is colorful, and woody shrubs and grasses grow in occasional clumps. The Rio Grande, about one-half mile away, is a muddy river which many people could wade across most of the year. During flood periods, however, the river roars past and has even flooded the lower areas where people farmed and lived.

Locating the Site
Map 1: Texas

Questions for Map 1

1. Locate the Rio Grande and Big Bend National Park in far southwest Texas. Why do you think the area was named Big Bend?

2. How far is it from Castolon to Alpine, which in the early 20th century was the nearest town with stores, churches, and access to the railroad?

3. How far was it to San Antonio, the nearest major city?

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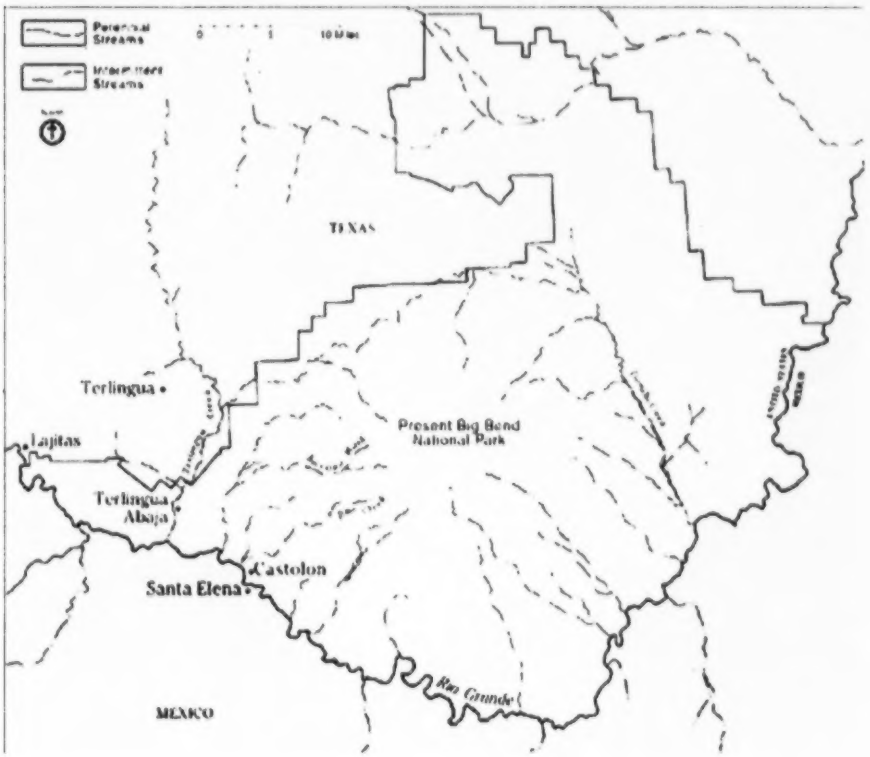
Locating the Site
Map 1: Southern Part of Big Bend



Questions for Map 2

1. Locate Castolon; Santa Elena (in Mexico); the Rio Grande; Terlingua Abaja, a farming community that grew up along Terlingua creek; and Terlingua, a mining community.

2. Why do you think so many of the settlements were located on or near a river?

3. Many of the streams in this area run only intermittently. What does that you tell about the local climate?

4. Which direction do you think the streams flow? What does this tell you about the terrain? In particular, where are the highest elevations within the park?

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Determining the Facts
Reading 1: Settling the Big Bend

Until the late 1800s, few families settled in the Big Bend territory. Comanches and Kiowa attacked passing travelers, and the Army could provide little protection. The region boasted few services such as churches and schools, and transportation was difficult.

By the 1880s, when railroads had been built and conflict between the Indians and the United States declined, American cattlemen began to enter the area. Mexican families who had earlier left the Big Bend began to drift back; they tended small herds of goats and farmed small tracts of land near springs, along the narrow creek valleys, and along the Rio Grande. Some were United States citizens, but many had grown up south of the river in Mexico. Some owned property, but others did not obtain legal title to the lands they occupied. Later-arriving American ranchers leased the land but did not bother the "squatters," who provided fresh vegetables and necessary labor.

The discovery of cinnabar, the ore used to produce mercury, also spurred population growth. Towns around the mines, most of which were near Terlingua, grew to include more than 3,000 people. Other settlements developed at Santa Helena (now called Santa Elena), Coyote, Terlingua Abaja, and Molinar; these small communities lay near the river and provided vegetables and hay to the mining towns about 25 miles north.

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910. For the next 10 years, revolutionaries like Pancho Villa, and bandits who found the war a convenient excuse, attacked villages and ranches on both sides of the river, robbing settlers of property and sometimes their lives. In 1911, the U.S. Army began establishing camps and mounted patrols to protect remote settlements. The Castolon area welcomed a small detachment of troopers from the 15th Cavalry when it established Camp Santa Helena in 1919. After the Mexican Revolution finally ended, the need for patrols declined, and by 1921 the U.S. Army had withdrawn.

About this time, Howard E. Perry began the Chisos Mining Company, one of the most famous enterprises in the Terlingua area. Perry also began a farming and ranching business with Wayne Cartledge, the son of his lawyer. They called their business "La Harmonia Company" in order to give an international flavor to the enterprise and to promote the idea of harmony between American and Mexican residents of the area. The Perry-Cartledge businesses along the lower Big Bend helped consolidate the local people into four related, but independent settlements or villages. One of these, Camp Santa Helena, soon thereafter came to be known as Castolon. Its residents included the Cartledge family, the La Harmonia Store manager and his wife, and a dozen or more Mexican and American families, all of whom were employed by the La Harmonia enterprises. Perry and Cartledge received permission from the Army to use the main

barracks building at Castolon as a trading post.

During the early years of Castolon, local people more or less ignored the international boundary. American ranchers regularly hired cowboys who were Mexican citizens, and Americans often visited their neighbors across the river. La Harmonia Store became an important source of supplies for American and Mexican families throughout the area. Only after 1920 did the laws of the international border become more carefully enforced. Even today there is no staffed port of entry within 75 miles of Castolon, and Mexican citizens regularly cross the Rio Grande and shop at the Castolon Store (formerly La Harmonia Store), use the telephones, or contact Big Bend National Park rangers for emergency medical help.

Questions for Reading 1

1. What natural feature marks the international boundary near Castolon?

2. What kept settlers from moving into the Big Bend area before the end of the 1800s? What kinds of dangers would they have faced if they had settled in the area then?

3. What developments brought more people into the area?

4. Why did Cartledge and Perry name their store "La Harmonia"? How did Mr. Cartledge attempt to carry out his goal?

5. Why do you think people along the Rio Grande so often ignored the international boundary between Mexico and the U.S.?

Reading 1 was excerpted and adapted from Clifford B. Casey, "Castolon," unpublished manuscript, 1967, Research Library, Big Bend National Park.

Determining the Facts
Reading 2: Captain Lafferty's Report

On November 12, 1919, Acting Morale Officer Captain F. R. Lafferty, stationed at Lajitas, Texas, reported that the troops of his command were split into three detachments: Lajitas, Terlingua, and Santa Helena. He went on to say:

> There is little opportunity for amusement for these men--there is nothing but a small Mexican settlement at Terlingua, and La Jitas [Lajitas] and nothing at all at Santa Helena. This station is located at a point over one hundred miles from the nearest railroad and the men rarely leave here except under exceptional circumstances.
>
> A football team has been organized between the Infantry and Cavalry detachments here. An effort has been made to enthuse the Infantry in riding but they do not take kindly to the idea of riding.
>
> A camp is being established in the Chisos Mountains about fifty miles from here where it is proposed to send detachments from time to time and allow them to hunt.
>
> An effort has been made to get a moving picture here but none have been shown here for months. One method I have adopted to keep up the spirits of the men is to feed them in the best possible manner, a difficult problem under the present ration system and method of supply; and to have them change stations frequently.
>
> The old non-commissioned officers seem to be contented here but the younger--the recruits--seem to long for a change of environment occasionally.

Questions for Reading 2

1. What did Captain Lafferty seem to feel was the biggest threat his men faced?

2. What activities were organized to keep the men occupied?

3. Based on what you know about the area, can you think of other activities that might have occupied the soldiers?

4. Do you think you would enjoy this military post? Why or why not?

Reading 2 was excerpted from Clifford B. Casey, "Castolon," unpublished manuscript, 1967, Research Library, Big Bend National Park.

Determining the Facts
Reading 3: Colonel Hornbrook's Recruiting Announcement

Because Castolon was far from the kinds of activities many young soldiers would want for their free time, Colonel Hornbrook wrote a recruiting broadside that he hoped would entice men to enlist. It was printed in February 1920.

Red Blooded Men Take Notice!

Do you ever long for the great outdoors?

Does the silent appeal of Nature, as exemplified by rugged mountains, deep canyons, rocky precipices, all equally inspiring get you?

Does being in a vast and undeveloped section, 100 miles from the railroad, strike a sympathetic note in your heart?

Does the idea of patrolling this historic and history making country where every man is on his own, make your pulse beat a bit faster?

Would you like to be in one of the wildest 'least explored sections and the only real frontier of the greatest nation on earth?

Is there a man to whom hunting--and the best to be had in the United States at that--camping out for days and cooking your own meals under the bluest sky on earth, with the added zest that at any time the crack of a bandit's rifle may call you to the really serious business of being a solider, is there a real man I repeat, to whom these things do not appeal?

Join the Fifth Cavalry, hunting and fishing par excellence, deer and quail in abundance, rabbits by the thousands, with the added thought that at any moment the tables may be turned and you may be the hunter, hunted.

We get hunters in this district from Maine to California. The Government pays you to be here. This is an opportunity for any outdoors man who is a real sure nuff hunter and trapper who wants to see real untrammeled Nature at her best.

Join the Fifth Cavalry if you are for really honest-to-God outdoor life and next to nature stuff. We have it and are enjoying every minute of it, and we are calling to any man--and that is every man--whose heart and soul yearns for the riches we have, and who hasn't the necessary riches to enjoy them.

The Fifth Cavalry wants real men: men who like to rough it. We need you and you need us and our wonderful Big Bend District with all its vastness, all its wildness, and that added zest of danger that all he men desire. Sign up now while the spirit moves.

Questions for Reading 3

1. Which document, Captain Lafferty's report or Colonel Hornbrook's recruiting announcement, do you think painted a more accurate picture of life in small Army posts like Castolon? Why?

2. Describe three items in Colonel Hornbrook's recruiting notice he hoped would attract men to enlist under his command. Would you have enlisted after reading this notice? (As it turned out, the Big Bend District which Hornbook commanded was disbanded a few months after this announcement was published.)

3. Why might Colonel Hornbrook have used these particular descriptions to enlist men?

4. Do you think this is a fair recruiting broadside? How might you try to enlist men if you were in the same situation?

Reading 3 was excerpted from Earl H. Elam, "Big Bend Archives: The Big Bend Military District and Colonel James J. Hornbrook's Recruiting Announcement," The Journal of Big Bend Studies, V.II, pp. 117-121, January 1990.

Determining the Facts
Reading 4: A Frontier Border Trading Post

When Cartledge and Perry decided to go into the mercantile business in 1918, there had already been at least two small stores in operation in the Castolon area for nearly 20 years. By 1918, however, the rapid development of ranching, mining, and farming in the area had yielded a considerable increase in the population of the lower Big Bend. In addition, the store's location adjacent to a vast region of the northern portions of two Mexican states, isolated from the interior of Mexico, gave it a large clientele from the northern part of Mexico.

La Harmonia Store sold not only merchandise, but also bought furs and candelilla wax, a natural wax derived from a desert plant. The business of dealing in hides, skins and furs continued at a lively pace until about 1940, when the dwindling supply from Mexico made it unprofitable. From 1920 to 1940, especially in the winter months, La Harmonia often looked like an old western fur trading post with hides, skins, and furs stacked in every possible nook and corner.

The management at La Harmonia soon learned to stock only those items which had a ready sale with the clientele of the border and the laborers on the farms and ranchers in the southern part of Brewster County. In addition, there was a limited demand from the occasional tourist for items such as blankets, glassware, pottery and other items. The majority of items on display for sale at La Harmonia were things needed by the people of the area. This is a partial list: pocket knives, barb wire, windmills, plows, harnesses, saddles, screwworm medicine, nails, sugar, coffee, meal, beans, salt, crackers, spices, karo [Karo] syrup, sardines, prunes, raisins, American cheese, salve, Quinine capsules, ointment, diarrhea pills, toothache drops, liniments, patent medicines, broad-brimmed hats, shoes (mostly work shoes), shirts, trousers, socks, underwear, lace ribbon, ladies' dresses, mens' suits (sometimes), bridal wreaths and veils, candies, beer, shoelaces, toys, and miscellaneous furniture.

Questions for Reading 4

1. Make a list of things you might buy if you were going to the grocery store and the mall with your family. Next, use a Spanish-English dictionary to look up at least 10 of your items and write down the words. (Spanish-speaking students might want to reverse this process.)

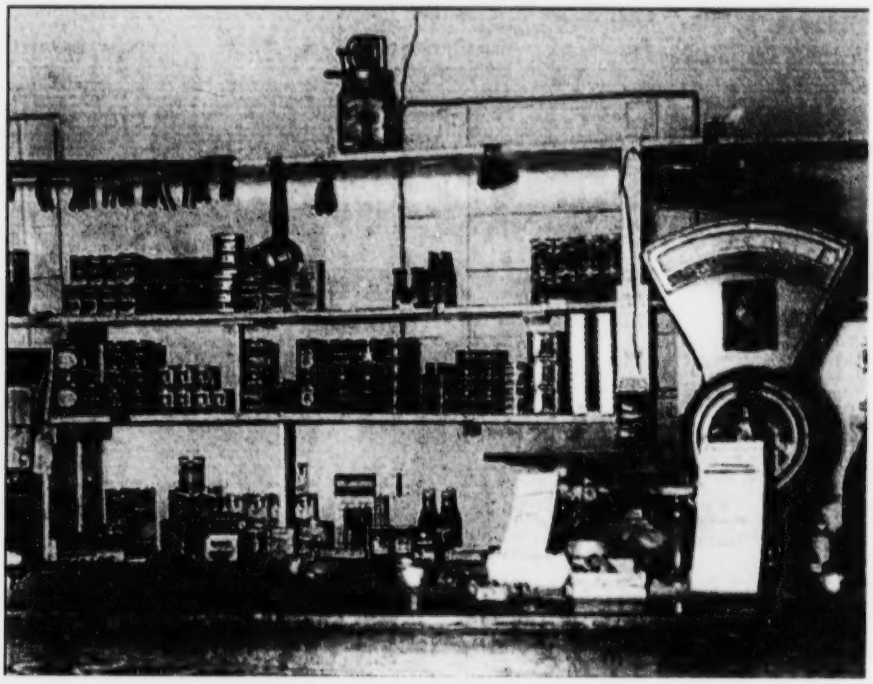
2. How many of the things you wanted to buy would have been available at La Harmonia Store?

3. What could you have substituted from the store and what could you have done without?

4. Where would families in Castolon have obtained goods like fresh milk, vegetables, and eggs?

Reading 4 was excerpted and adapted from Clifford B. Casey, "Castolon," unpublished manuscript, 1967, Research Library, Big Bend National Park.

Visual Evidence
Photo 1: La Harmonia Store, 1961



(Big Bend National Park)

Questions for Photo 1

1. How do the items pictured here compare with the list in Reading 4?

2. How do the items pictured here compare with the items in your local grocery store? Can you purchase these items in your grocery story today?

Visual Evidence
Photo 2: Cotton Fields with the Sierra Ponce in the Background

(Big Bend National Park)

Photo 3: Old Cotton Gin at Castolon

Photo 3 is the remains of the Castolon cotton gin. Cotton gins were used to separate the cotton lint (fibers) from the seeds and stalks of the plants. Mr. Cartledge had the gin built in 1923 and brought an expert into the community to teach the farmers how to use it. Families in the area grew cotton and ginned it in the Castolon gin for most of the next 20 years.

Questions for Photos 2 & 3

1. Why do you think cotton farming was never very profitable? (If needed, refer to Map 1 and Reading 2 for your answer.)

2. Do you think the cotton gin was profitable for Mr. Cartledge? Why or why not?

Visual Evidence
Photo 4: La Harmonia Store, garage, shop, and water tower, 1955.

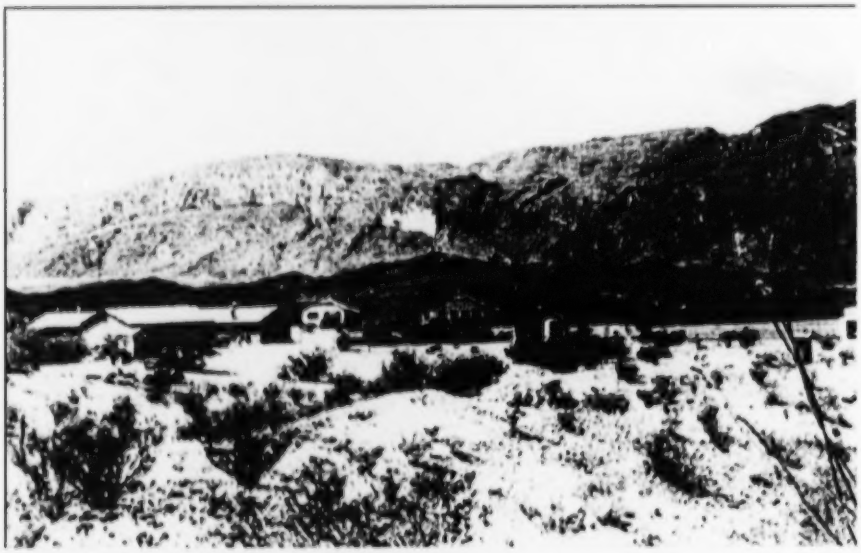
(Big Bend National Park)

Questions for Photo 4

1. What do you think the tall structure on the left is? Why would it have been necessary?

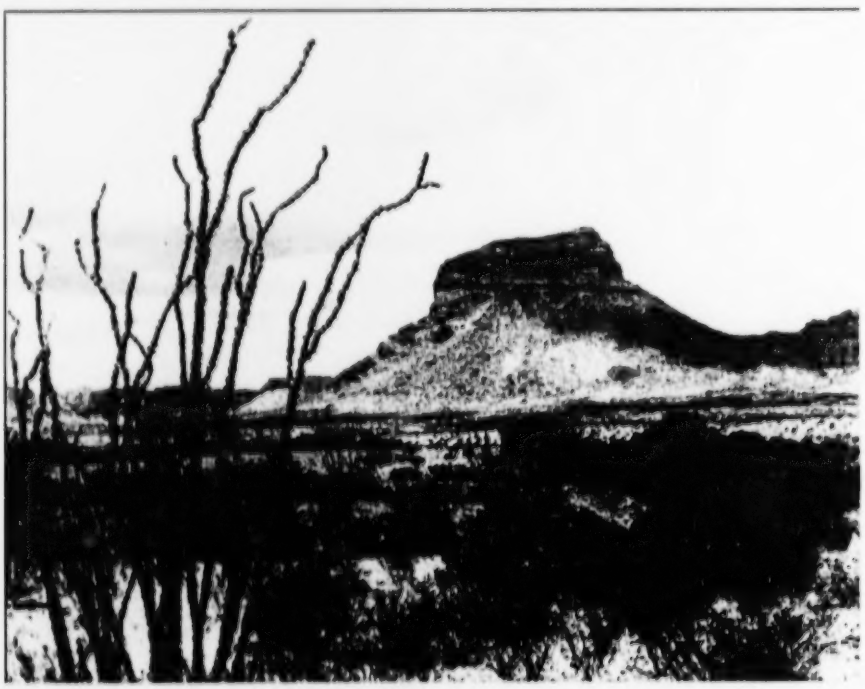
2. Examine the buildings in Photos 2, 3, & 4. Can you tell what kinds of building materials were used to construct them? Why might they have been chosen?

Visual Evidence
Photo 5: Castolon, Texas



(Big Bend National Park)

Photo 6: Cerro Castellan, from Castolon.



Questions for Photos 5 & 6

1. How would you describe the landscape? Compare your description to your surroundings today. What is similar? What is different?

2. Why do you think Big Bend has not grown as rapidly as other parts of Texas, such as Houston and Dallas?

Putting It All Together

The following activities allow students to compare what it was like to live in Castolon with life in their own communities during the same time period. They will also get some additional practice using Spanish.

Activity 1: Growing Up in Castolon

Ask students to write a 300 word essay describing the life they would have experienced if they were their current age and lived in the Castolon area during frontier times. Ask them to take into account the following questions:

1. What language or languages would you have spoken at home? Would everyone in the neighborhood have spoken the same language?
2. How would your family have made a living?
3. How often would you have traveled to a big city?
4. What would have happened when somebody got sick? Who would the family have called to help cure the sick person?
5. If you had the choice of crossing the Rio Grande in a rowboat and walking half a mile to La Harmonia Store, or doing without sugar, salt and flour, what would you have done?

Activity 2: Learning Some Spanish

Have the students use a Spanish/English dictionary to define the following words:

cerro, sierra, harina, leche, azucar, sal, vestido, maiz, pantalon,
caballo, caballero, queso, casa, rio, camisa, zapatos, sombrero.

Then hold an old-fashioned spelling bee--with a twist. Divide the class into two equal groups (if class numbers are unequal, appoint one student as assistant judge whose duty is to keep a running tally of correctly spelled and correctly used words). Have groups line up in two rows and then, alternating sides, give each student an opportunity to state the correct Spanish word when you call out the English equivalent. If there are more students than words, go through the process again, this time calling out the words in Spanish, with the students responding with the English version.

Activity 3: Comparing Castolon to the Local Community

Have the students research what was happening in their own community from 1920 to 1940. Have them investigate:

1. How the population changed between 1920 and 1940;
2. Whether there were railroads, paved roads, and electric lights, and if so,

when;

3. What public schools, hospitals, and libraries existed;
4. What kinds of work people did to make a living;
5. Whether the community was ethnically or racially mixed, and the dominant languages spoken;
6. What effects the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression had; and
7. What the city looked like--what types of buildings, what building materials, how large, what ornamentation, etc.

When research is completed, have the students prepare a tabloid-sized newspaper which provides a description of the community from 1920 to 1940. Then ask students to draw a timeline showing the comparison of their community and Castolon.

Castolon: A Meeting Place of Two Cultures --Supplementary Resources

By looking at Castolon: A Meeting Place of Two Cultures, students will compare the Spanish and Anglo influences on settlements along the Texas-Mexico border region of the Rio Grande. Those interested in learning more will find that the Internet offers a variety of interesting materials.

Big Bend National Park http://www.nps.gov/bibe/home.htm

Big Bend National Park is a unit of the National Park System. The park's Web pages include information on one of the largest and least visited of America's national parks. Included is information on the history of the Castolon Historic District, the importance of the La Harmonia Company Store, and a general cultural history of the area.

The Handbook of Texas Online
http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/search.new.html

Search the Handbook of Texas Online, a multidisciplinary encyclopedia of Texas history, geography, and culture, for further information on Castolon and the Mexican Revolution. The handbook comprises more than 23,000 articles on people, places, events, historical themes, institutions, and a host of other topic categories dealing with Texas.

Smithsonian: U.S. Latino History and Culture
http://www.si.edu/resource/faq/nmah/latino.htm

Visit this special Latino feature for information on "border culture." Included on the site is an overview of issues related to living on the border, both in the past and the present. Of special interest are the links titled "United States-Mexico Borderlands/La Frontera" and "Borders and Identity."

Library of Congress: The South Texas Border, 1900-1920
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/tex/texintro.html

The American Memory Collection feature, The South Texas Border, 1900-1920 captures the Lower Rio Grande Valley during the early 1900s. It includes negatives, slides, prints, postcards, and maps that document the history and development of South Texas and the Mexican border, including the Mexican Revolution, the U.S. military presence along the border, and the development of the Rio Grande Valley.

Library of Congress: America's Story from America's Library
http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/1890-1913

The America's Story from America's Library Web page explores what was happening in different regions of the United States during the same time period when Castolon was being settled. Included on the site are photographs accompanied by histories of a variety of events occurring around the country.

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